

A History of
Hammacher Schlemmer,

New York's Most Famous Store Since before the Civil War 1848-1984

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History of Hammacher Schlemmer

Introduction

Ask any New Yorker about Hammacher Schlemmer and the response will likely be "That's where rich people go to buy gadgets."

True, but not the whole truth. Today's popular image of the 136-year-old emporium at 145 East 57th Street is based in part upon widespread and long-continuing media emphasis of the more exotic and glamorous aspects of its trade. The European royalty, Arab Sheiks, Indian Maharajahs, Hollywood stars, presidents, and the super-rich of many nations who have been among its clientele for years make exciting copy. So do the things they have occasionally bought – sedan chairs, a \$48,000 replica of an early French fire engine, a half-size Model T Ford, and smaller whimsies like the "Nothing Box", a block of wood with continuously flashing little lights that sold for \$25.

Often overlooked are the thousands of retail and mail order customers who come to Hammacher Schlemmer for unique or unusual household and personal conveniences for themselves or for gifts – ingenious devices that perform a new function, or perform an old one better. While many of these customers are in upper income brackets, they are not frivolous purchasers. They seek quality, distinction, or beauty as well as utility from the stock of more than 2,000 items.

Today, only about 25 percent of Hammacher Schlemmer's sales volume originates in the New York store. The opening of a Chicago store in 1984 will boost retail sales, but total sales, which are expected to increase to about \$17 million in 1984, will still be predominantly from the store's popular catalogue.

Patrons include many of the rich and famous throughout the world who may or may not visit the store from time to time, but the bulk of their purchases from store or catalogue consists of practical items that serve a useful purpose.

The history of Hammacher Schlemmer has not been neglected in the media, but the treatment has tended to create the picture of a high-priced toy store for adults who never grew up. Those who learn the real history of the store will want to redefine that image. The perspective of the past shows how often yesterday's new products, discovered and/or introduced by Hammacher Schlemmer, has become an accepted part of modern everyday living. The electric toaster, the portable radio, the steam iron, the Waring blender, electric shavers, microwave ovens, and portable computers are just a few of today's commonplace items that debuted in their earliest forms at Hammacher Schlemmer.

As innovations graduate into the highly competitive channels of mass merchandising, they are often eliminated from stock to make room for the next generation of inventions. The firm has chosen its niche on the cutting edge of new products.

The door is open to anyone with a new or better idea. The Hammacher Schlemmer Institute, an affiliated but independent not-for-profit research facility, tests those products that show promise. If they meet criteria, they have an opportunity to face the test of the marketplace among the up to 2,000,000 consumers who receive catalogues. Not all products make it past the gadget stage, of course. Some may be dropped after a season or two, joining the host of curiosities of bygone days. Others may have a continuing but limited success in a small market, even if they are not widely accepted.

Although the thrust of the business shifted from hardware to housewares in the 1920's, progress and innovation have been a way of life at Hammacher Schlemmer through most of its history. Much has changed in the positioning of the company, but there is a continuity of spirit in Hammacher Schlemmer that guides the conduct of its business today in much the same way that it did a century or more ago. The present chairman, J. Roderick MacArthur, sums up that spirit well in the preface to a recent catalogue. Speaking of the customers, he asks: "Why do they keep coming back to the same old stand? I really think it is because they always know what they can expect to find at Hammacher Schlemmer: the best products, unique products, products that work, and a guarantee of service and satisfaction second to none." This is the silver thread that weaves through the Hammacher Schlemmer story and ties the whole thing together.

Beginnings in the Bowery

Until the 1820's, almost all the emigration to America came from the British Isles. Then a trickle of immigrants started arriving from Germany and Scandinavia, swelling with each decade as the industrial revolution in Europe displaced workers from jobs and as the reactionary political system of Prince Metternich grew more oppressive.

Among the earlier Germany immigrants in New York was one William Tollner, who sometime during the 1840's opened a hardware store at 221 the Bowery. The first records of the business were for 1848, which has been taken as the founding year, although the store may have been operating before that.

This was long before the Bowery became a skid row, and it still had some brilliant years ahead of it. The street was named after Peter Stuyvesant's farm, the Bouwerij, which it had linked with New Amsterdam, following an old Indian trail.

According to the sketch in Hammacher Schlemmer's 75th anniversary history, the first store occupied the first floor of a four-story structure. The single word, "Hardware", stretched across the front above the door. No. 221 was flanked on each side by lower buildings.

On the walkway outside this storefront, sometime in 1853, a boy of 12 might be found hawking wares displayed on a table. The lad was Tollner's nephew; some say his grandnephew, who recently arrived by packet sailing vessel from Germany.

William Schlemmer had been born in Westphalia of Lutheran Parents on April 20, 1841. The circumstances of his coming to the United States are not clear, but it is said that he landed with either a letter in hand addressed to his relative, or a card around his neck asking help in delivering the boy to Tollner's care.

In any case, young Schlemmer found sanctuary and employment in the store at two dollars per week, one dollar of which he sent back to Germany to help with the expenses of the family he had left. Presumably, Tollner provided lodging for the boy, because it is doubtful he could have subsisted on such meager wages, even in those pre-inflationary days.

Child labor laws were then unknown. Thousands of children worked in the factories under degrading conditions. William Schlemmer's long hours at the hardware store, beginning at five in the morning and lasting sometimes until midnight, were perhaps no more arduous than work he might have found in Germany, and certainly they offered greater opportunity. As he grew to young manhood, he took advantage of the entrepreneurial promise of the New World.

The First Move

It is hard today to envision mid-19th century New York City. Instead of skyscrapers, church steeples penetrated above the rooftops. There was no Brooklyn Bridge, no Statue of Liberty, but many landmarks of Colonial days that have since disappeared were still standing. What would later be Central Park was part of the farmland that stretched between the city of some 200,000 at the south end of Manhattan and Harlem at the north.

The city was burgeoning. Although business was still centered in the twisting streets of lower Manhattan, wealthy families were moving north into brownstone mansions around Washington Square, leaving the older dwellings for immigrants.

Construction boomed the hardware business, and by 1859 Tollner's needed to expand, but the proprietor lacked capital. William Schlemmer had struck up an acquaintance with Alfred Hammacher, who had money to invest. Schlemmer persuaded him to put \$5,000 into the store, Hammacher was made a member of the firm and the name was changed to Tollner & Hammacher. A move to larger quarters not far distant at 209 Bowery ensued. Here it remained for the next 45 years.

Through unremitting hard work and thrift, William Schlemmer was able to accumulate enough money of his to buy out his uncle's share in the business, little by little. He was made a partner in 1867. After Tollner's death in the 1870's, the Tollner name was dropped from the firm, but it was not until 1883 that Schlemmer's was added.

An early photograph of 209 Bowery shows "Hammacher & Schlemmer Co., Tools Cutlery" on the side of the building. The first New York City telephone directory of 1878 lists "Hamacher & Co." (omitting the second "m") among the 271 original subscribers - an indication that the firm's penchant for progress had begun even then. It was also one of the first business establishments in the city to install electric lighting.

Alfred Hammacher was an investor in the business, rather than an active participant, although he was a director. The moving spirit was William Schlemmer. When Hammacher returned to his native Germany in 1885 to live out his days, Schlemmer bought out most of his interest, except for a few shares that remained in the hands of Hammacher heirs until far into the next century.

The Civil War created vast demands for metals and hardware of every sort, and as in all wars, non-military need suffered. One of the shortages was in coinage. Merchants lacked coins to make change. As an emergency measure, the Government allowed them to mint coins of their own for this purpose, redeemable in goods at their places of business. Tollner & Hammacher was among the first firms to issue such "copperheads" or "rebellion tokens" as they were called. During 1862 and 1863, business houses flooded the city with millions of tokens made of copper, brass, copper-nickel or sometimes of lead. There were six to seven thousand known varieties. Abuses of the coining privilege finally led the Government to put a stop to the practice in 1864. Few of the tokens ever found their way back to the place of issue to be redeemed for merchandise.

The First Catalogues

The Encyclopedia Britannica says: "Next to food and clothing, hardware is perhaps the chief necessity of humanity". The term "hardware" in the early 19th Century meant mechanic's tools and builder's hardware. It was not until later that it came to include goods for kitchen and dining room furnishing and other household purposes. Most hardware was imported from Europe in the early days.

Many artisans emigrating from northern Europe brought their own tools with them to America, where the designs were copied, first in local blacksmith shops, then by new factories springing up in New England. Soon a domestic hardware manufacturing business was flourishing and competing with imports.

While manufacturing centered in Connecticut, New York City became the trade center supplying retailers and hardware users up and down the coast and westward as the nation grew. The focus of manufacturing later shifted to Ohio, Michigan and other Midwestern states, but New York remained the hub of wholesale distribution.

With the advantage of its early start and the reputation it had established, Hammacher & Company became known to a widening circle of customers as it sent salesmen out on the road. They needed a catalogue as a working tool, and far-off customers needed one from which to order by mail.

Probably flyers and price lists had been sent out earlier, but a photograph of the cover of an 1881 Hammacher catalogue is the oldest existing evidence of a printed, bound book. In succeeding years, various supplements and updates were published, including some special catalogues devoted to the needs of specific industries, because a large part of the business was directly with manufacturers and railroads.

One of the most interesting of these is the illustrated catalogue and price list of pianoforte materials and tools, dated 1885. The gold imprinted cover carries the full name, Hammacher Schlemmer & Co., and the 209 Bowery address. However, the title page shows additional addresses at 3 & 15 Rivington Street, indicating that the growth of the business had required more space, probably for warehousing.

A steel engraving of 209 Bowery depicts a storefront with two doorways. One, flanked by show windows, is labeled "Hardware Department" and is obviously the entrance to the retail store. Above the other double doors are the words "Upholstery Department". A stairway probably led to the second floor, or could the forward-looking Schlemmer have installed one of those new-fangled elevators? Above the four second-story windows is the legend "Upholstery Goods".

The elegant 1880'S brought forth ornate furniture designs and tufted luxury in sofas, chairs and footstools. Upholsterers needed special tools and materials to answer fashion's dictates, and they could find them at Hammacher Schlemmer.

The sign across the building at the third floor level reads "Cabinet and Piano Hardware". The 80-page catalogue pictures the varied items that must have been on display here – almost everything that went into an upright or square piano except the case. The firm was sole U.S. agent for Smith's patented steel music wire made in England, and also for a leading German brand. Sounding boards, brass hinges and casters, special planes, chisels, punches and other tools, clamps, glue pots, even elaborate gold-plated candle holders, or sconces, to illumine the music rack were included in the catalogue.

For piano maintenance, there were tuner's kits. Tuners were kept busy keeping the pianos in theaters and music halls in pitch for the operatic stars and other famous performers who came to New York.

But it was music in the home that made the piano trade big business in its heyday and attracted skilled Old World craftsmen to U.S. piano factories. There were no radios or TV sets, and the phonograph was still just a novelty gadget. Families provided their own entertainment around the parlor piano or organ. Every well-brought up youngster took piano lessons.

There were hundreds of piano names, of which only a few like Steinway and Chickering still survive. When the piano business was at its height, Hammacher Schlemmer was shipping the equivalent of 20 carloads of piano pins a year to the W.W. Kimball Company in Chicago – enough for 12,000 pianos.

In later catalogues of general merchandise, piano wire was recommended for other uses requiring wire of high quality. A regular customer was Alexander Calder, who bought wire for his celebrated mobiles.

The line drawings in these early catalogues are outstanding for their painstaking attention to detail and the simplicity of their presentation, their purpose being not to lure or beguile, but to show the buyer exactly what he might expect to get. In this respect, Hammacher Schlemmer catalogues of today follow the company tradition, but with photography for illustration instead of line engravings.

Also evident in the catalogues is the high quality of the merchandise they represent. The brass inlays on T-squares, the fine turn of a handle, the beautifully designed door hardware, and the look of parts that fit together perfectly with absolute precision bespeak the German origins of the firm and its devotion to faultless workmanship. Many of these items sold around the turn of the century are collector's pieces today. The 1896 general catalogue, a collector's item in itself, was reprinted in 1978 by the Midwest Tool Collectors Association and the Early American Industries Association.

The tools and myriad parts available represent another antecedent to a living principle at Hammacher Schlemmer – innovation. By keeping abreast or ahead of trends in an era of invention and catering to new needs engendered by developing industries, the firm rose with the business tides instead of drowning in the progress, as do so many companies that are resistant to change.

As the talking machine was perfected and records of favorite opera arias and light classics became available, first on cylinders and later on platters, Hammacher Schlemmer opened a phonograph supply department.

But it was the horseless carriage that really put the turn into the Turn of the Century. In a time when municipalities were still passing ordinances to keep the confounded contraptions off the streets, Hammacher Schlemmer was opening an auto parts department.

One did not don goggles and duster to venture forth in a White Steamer or a Stevens Duryea without being prepared for emergency. There were no service stations to pull into, and qualified mechanics were few and far between. If a tire went flat or a gasket blew, the driver was on his own. Hammacher Schlemmer offered the motorist a Touring Kit with a large assortment of tools in a handsome wooden case. Or, for less money, he could obtain the Junior Kit in a roll-up leather holder.

Hammacher Schlemmer remained a reliable source of auto parts and tools while livery stables completed the transition to garages, and dealerships with dependable

service departments became established. Then, when it had ceased to be an innovation, the auto parts business was phased out.

The granddaddy of all catalogues was the massive edition of 1912, a giant tome of 1,112 pages that was four years in the compiling. It became the authoritative reference for hardware of all sorts and confirmed Hammacher Schlemmer as the most complete hardware house in New York, and probably in the world. It was to the hardware industry and to catalogue publishing what clipper ships were to sailing. It was impossible to do better. There was no further challenge in that direction. Perhaps therein lay the genesis of change.

Enter the Second Generation

Today, William Schlemmer would be called a workaholic. Obituaries based on information provided by undertakers or members of the family are understandably laudatory, but the article that appeared in the press December 30, 1916, following his demise at age 75 is nonetheless revealing:

"William Schlemmer was an indefatigable worker, and a man of the highest possible character, whose habits were exemplary in the extreme, and whose business principles were beyond reproach. He possessed in a peculiar degree the habit of work and often remarked that he was never happier than when actively engaged in the routine duties of business. He was a never failing example of industry to all who worked with and for him. Always extremely courteous; kindly but firm in manner, approachable always and yet naturally reticent; a keen student of general business affairs, and while always conservative, nevertheless a true optimist".

Life at home with such a paragon is apt to be uncomfortable for children. His son and two daughters found him a kindly but stern parent. They were raised in an atmosphere that was the opposite of the father's spartan boyhood, with all the advantages that a successful parent could provide.

The son, William F. Schlemmer, was sent to one of the best prep schools and could have entered any college or university of his choosing, which indeed might have pleased the father. Instead, he elected at age 15 to enter the family business as a stock boy at \$5 per week, determined to learn its intricacies and work his way up through the ranks.

Perhaps he was reacting to the familiar parental harangue that begins, "When I was your age, I...." With a defiant, "I'll show him". In any case, beginning in 1893, he applied himself assiduously to the business, emulating the work habits of his father and learning all about hardware, which he later confessed, "is the only thing I don't have the slightest interest in".

Once, when someone remarked to him with pride that he still had a tool he had bought from Hammacher Schlemmer years before, he replied, "That's the trouble with the hardware business".

Despite his aversion, hardware remained his main concern for most of his long career. He learned the business so well that his father was able to turn over the management reins to him in 1904, although he remained the titular head for 10 more years, continued to come to the office, and was deferentially referred to as "the old gentleman". Legends about the senior Schlemmer show him as the old-fashioned German authoritarian, a manager who expected much of his employees and was sparing

in praise. To a salesman who proudly announced he had sold 35 tons of piano wire in a year, he responded, "That's fine. Double it next year."

A new bookkeeper asked whether his work had been satisfactory, prompting the elder Schlemmer to inquire, "Do you want us to put a bouquet on your desk every morning?"

Despite, or perhaps because of his exacting ways, he inspired loyalty and high performance among employees. Turnover was low, and many had long service records.

The Move To Fourth Avenue

The Bowery was not what it once was. From the early 1860's until the mid-1870's, it had enjoyed a splendor as the theatrical center of New York, antedating the Great White Way of Broadway. Tony Pastor's famous Music Hall was just a few doors from the store. Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, Adelina Patti, the Italian opera diva, and other stars of stage and concert hall drew capacity crowds.

But by the 1880's, the street and surrounding district had begun a downhill slide. The Third Avenue "L" clattering past the second floor windows cast shadows upon the sidewalks, where sprawled that reprehensible character, the Bowery Bum. Chinatown, with its supposed dens of iniquity, was just around the corner in the vicinity of Chatham Square.

Urban blight was not the only reason for moving, however. The wholesale district was shifting north, and the firm needed a much larger building to consolidate its operations and permit further growth.

Consequently, in the fourth year after the start of the new century, Hammacher Schlemmer left the street of its origin to occupy a more spacious and modern building at 13th Street and Fourth Avenue. William F. Schlemmer, who had been named vice president in 1898, was designated general manager at this juncture.

The new home was on an historic site where New York's first reservoir once stood, drawing water from a well 112 feet deep. The frontage of the seven-story brick building was more than twice that at the old location.

The Schlemmers never stinted when it came to adopting something that would increase the efficiency of the business. They were always among the first to try the new, regardless of expense. The new building offered opportunity to install the latest materials handling equipment, such as a delivery chute to carry boxes from the shipping room on the seventh floor to the basement and an escalator to bring heavy cases up from the basement.

William F. Schlemmer seems to have been more imaginative than his father, and he brought a lighter touch, even to the hardware business for which he had no affection. It was after the move and before World War I that the Hammacher Schlemmer gnomes appeared in advertising and in the store windows.

These quaint, Disney-like figures, akin to Santa's elves, could be imagined busily working in the warehouse throughout the night, filling customer orders and doing good generally. They derived from German legend, and in the period when cast iron lawn ornaments were popular, families of gnomes clustered on the spacious lawns of well to do Germans. Descendants of gnomes today promote such products as Keebler's biscuits.

With the approach of World War I, antipathy to things German increased, and Hammacher Schlemmer undeservedly became suspect. Among the older employees were many names such as Werner, Krantz, Mueller, Schwartz, Rumpf, and Bingendorf

that bespoke their Teutonic origin. However, the entry of the United States into the War proved how thoroughly Americanized they had become. The gnomes on Hammacher Schlemmer car cards took to urging people to buy Liberty Bonds. The firm was largely occupied with military procurement. A month before the start of the great American drive in the summer of 1918, three army officers descended on the store and requisitioned everything in sight.

At the end of the War, the firm was awarded a citation that read: "The War Department of the United States of America recognizes in this award for distinguished service the loyalty, energy and efficiency in the performance of the war work by which Hammacher Schlemmer Co. added materially in obtaining victory for the arms of the United States of America in the war with the Imperial German Government and the Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Government".

Russia also became a big customer during the War. An agent for the Czar's government came in one day and ordered a huge quantity of drill chucks, which the clerk carefully pointed out might not fit Russian tools. "My instructions are to buy lots of everything", the agent said. "Send them along."

The Bolsheviks later bought all sorts of hardware as models for Russian manufacture, which were shipped in chests with photographs tacked to the covers showing what each tool was called and what it was to be used for.

In addition to a grain of humor, the younger Schlemmer had a stronger touch of class, which he brought into the hardware business on Fourth Avenue, staid and routine as it had always been considered. Salesmen on the floor wore frock coats. When a customer wanted to see a particularly fine tool, a doorknob or other piece of hardware on the neatly arranged shelves, the salesman would lay it before him on a black velvet cushion. When the inspection was completed, he would remove the fingerprints with a chamois cloth before replacing the object on the shelf.

With continued growth, the firm took over another building on Thirteenth Street as an annex for the receiving and shipping departments and for employee facilities, including a lunchroom. It also expanded into another older building on Thirteenth Street, where reserve supplies of goods that might be required for emergency shipment were maintained. Piano and other supplies were moved into yet another building on Twelfth Street, which also housed the company's fleet of motor trucks, another sign that it was keeping up with modern times. Later, the floor above Luchow's famous restaurant was taken over for warehouse space.

At its 75th anniversary in 1923, Hammacher Schlemmer had nearly 300 employees, including eight officers and directors. All of the officers had service records ranging from 18 to over 40 years, and 40 of the other employees had been with the company from 10 to 43 years. It was an almost exclusively masculine organization, with only three women among the long-term group. That would eventually change.

Uptown To The Carriage Trade

After World War I, the roaring 1920's came in on a note of general optimism. Warren G. Harding won the presidency handily on a platform of "back to normalcy". The Teapot Dome oil scandal and Harding's death in office were only momentarily sobering. Under "Silent Cal" Coolidge, optimism rose with the stock market. The Florida land boom, the Charleston, Broadway musicals, the Algonquin wits, the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the speakeasies that mocked the Volstead Act were manifestations of the

surface sophistication that found its center in New York, or Gotham as those in the know loved to call it.

Schlemmer was well aware of the prosperous bustle in uptown Manhattan, where he and his wife lived. Since there was a lot of building activity on the fashionable Upper East Side, he concluded that contractors and building tradesmen would welcome a supply source close by.

On the strength of this reasoning, Hammacher Schlemmer decided to venture off the beaten path of the hardware industry and chose for a new home, a site on East 57th Street, where the famous Huntington stables had been. The new 12-story building begun in 1925 was opened with fanfare in 1926. Most of the stock was moved up from 13th street.

It soon became apparent that Mr. Schlemmer had either miscalculated or engaged in wishful thinking regarding the need and desires of the building trades for an uptown source. They continued to patronize the old location, and few came into the gleaming new store on 57th Street.

However, a new class of customer frequented the neighborhood and could be readily attracted with the right merchandise and service. These were the New Yorkers who had money to spend in the art, antique and decorator shops and might be looking for something special in housewares or unusual gifts.

Mr. Schlemmer was quick to perceive the way the wind was blowing and adjusted his merchandising plan to the newfound market. Hardware lines were relegated to the basement. The first floor was filled with luxury items appealing to society matrons who were not on a budget. On the upper floors were housewares, furnishings for the bath, dressing room or closet, kitchen and fireplace equipment, electrical appliances, and summer and terrace furniture.

The carriage trade was not literally riding in carriages in the 1920's. (The equipages in Central Park were reserved for tourists, then as now.) But they were riding in chauffeured limousines and town cars bearing the well-polished nameplates of Pierce Arrow, Packard, Lincoln, Cadillac, Stutz, Rolls Royce, or Duesenberg. As these impressive vehicles pulled up to the curb, the doorman was alert to open the door and escort the occupants into the store, where they were pampered with attention.

The carpenters and cabinetmakers who did find their way to 57th Street were awed by what they saw. Some stood on the sidewalk and had to be beckoned to come in. Then they had to run the gamut of crystal chandeliers and well-groomed Junior Leaguers to the basement, which was still well stocked with hardware, although it didn't match the old location.

Gradually, the hardware department, too, was gentrified with emphasis upon decorative fittings, boys' tool chests and hobbyist accessories. The downtown warehouses were phased out one by one, and the Thirteenth Street store was finally closed in 1935. Wholesale hardware operations were greatly reduced. One of the last to go was the American Piano Supply Company, a subsidiary, which remained profitable for some years. By the end of the 1930's hardware accounted for only about 10 per cent of the firm's business.

Some old timers grumbled about the changes, but most went along like good soldiers. As for Schlemmer, he found himself running the sort of business he had always wanted to be in. Possibly it was a Freudian slip of business judgment that had liberated him from his inherited bondage to hardware.

The new look caught on quickly. New Yorkers loved the store's panache and the array of somewhat giddy merchandise. The name of the firm was conducive to light banter, which found expression in the lyrics of a Howard Dietz tune in the first "Little Show", a Broadway musical in 1929. Sung by Fred Allen of radio fame, "Hammacher Schlemmer, I love you" went like this:

"Hammacher Schlemmer, I love you
You're like a sweetheart to me
Hammacher Schlemmer, above you
No other firm e'er could be
Your business deserves devotion that is loyal
I love you just like a fellow loves his goil
So always remember
Hammacher Schlemmer, I love you
Hammacher Schlemmer, I love you
Roebuck and Sears, I adore you
If you want to buy a bassinet or buy a hog
Don't be in a fog, use our Catalogue
Hammacher Schlemmer, you're sweet, dear
Hammacher Schlemmer, I repeat, dear
Macy's and Gimbles have plenty of thimbles
But I love you."

Dozens of friends sent Schlemmer copies of the song, but he was not amused. You don't kid the business.

The move uptown and away from the hardware business, however radical and risky it seemed at the time, turned out to be a good thing by the end of the decade. With the onset of the Great Depression, construction came to a halt and with it an important part of the hardware trade. Oddly enough, the new lines of merchandise seemed less vulnerable to economic downturn than some conservative basic industries. Perhaps it was because something from Hammacher Schlemmer provided relief from pervading gloom, or because many of the customers, even after being wrung out in the stock market, still had relatively large amounts of money left.

No doubt the reduction of hardware inventories and elimination of overhead by closing old facilities strengthened the firm's financial position which, thanks to conservative management, had survived unimpaired through the financial panics that periodically bankrupted many businesses in earlier years.

After the 57th Street building had been erected, it was sold to an investor and leased back, netting a profit—a financial technique used more often now than it was then.

What had been learned in the hardware business about catalogue selling was carried over into the new regime with the mailing out of the first housewares catalogue in 1931—a first of its kind in the field.

Hand-drawn illustrations and prices accompanied all 59 items presented, including an eight-cup electric Silex coffee maker for \$13.95. The most expensive item was an electric kitchen ventilator fan for \$65, with an installation charge of \$7. The least costly item was a rubber play bone for the dog.

The catalogue carried a new slogan, "The House of Fine Housewares" and gave notice of the affiliation with the firm of Miss Lillian Lovell and Three New Yorkers, Inc., formerly of 8 West 47th Street.

The all-male tradition on the selling floors was at last broken in 1935 with the hiring of a Miss Palmer. She was soon followed by a number of attractive young women with social savoir-faire, including at least one from the Junior League in Scarsdale, NY. Among the first customers she waited upon happened to be Lord Rothschild, who dropped in to buy an outdoor thermometer for one dollar.

"Think I'll wander around a bit," the young Lord remarked. "Want to tag along?" Miss O'Brien eagerly accepted the invitation, and when Rothschild left, he had bought some \$500 worth of merchandise, including a white goatskin blanket and pillow set for \$350. When he got back to England, he called Miss O'Brien to order two more sets in pink.

The gnomes tried to join the parade uptown after donning shorts and having their beards shaved, but they still reminded Mr. Schlemmer of the hardware business, the image he was trying to shed. Consequently, they had to go underground for a number of years.

The company was losing its Germanic character. The Number Two man was Walter McKibbin, a Scotsman and a veteran with the firm who was general manager. Nevertheless, as the clouds of war with Germany gathered once more, Schlemmer got letters from the large Jewish population in New York asking how he felt about Hitler. He took the trouble to answer these personally and at length, and the firm stopped buying German goods.

In the unique niche Hammacher Schlemmer was filling, it had only one significant competitor, Lewis & Conger, a housewares store on the West Side that had a virtual monopoly on the carriage trade in that area. Hammacher Schlemmer succeeded in luring away its star salesman, who had a personal following among the butlers, cooks and housekeepers who did the purchasing for kitchen and closet equipment, linens and the like for their employers. Most of the business came along with him, and the rest was eventually brought in through the acquisition of Lewis & Conger in 19__.

The Flowering of Gadgetry

Since the metamorphosis that began in the 1920's, a great deal has been written about Hammacher Schlemmer and the gadgets for which it has become world famous. Although efforts have been made to protect the privacy of the great and the near great who came to the store or placed orders for exotica from afar, their identities have leaked out and legends have grown up around them.

Every president since Herbert Hoover with the exception of Jimmy Carter, visited the store to buy items that shed sidelights on interests or hobbies. The Quaker Hoover seemed especially taken with bar accessories, like the "Hootch Owl", a post-repeal novelty. Ladybird Johnson ordered a redoing of the closets in the White House and Blair House, and Patricia Nixon added further refinements.

The Duke and Duchess of Windsor usually stopped by when in New York. The Duke's special interest was flashlights, and he bought every type in stock, as well as unusual corkscrews.

King Hassan of Morocco spent \$28,000 in an afternoon for a half-scale Model T Ford, a hot dog cart and other items.

The British royal family, the King and Queen of Spain, Princess Grace of Monaco, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Secretary of State Kissinger, J. Edgar Hoover and Nelson Rockefeller have been among other notable customers.

Among stars of stage, screen or concert hall have been the Beatles, Ingrid Bergman, Yul Brynner, Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, and Anthony Quinn. In the days before Visa and MasterCard, the credit list of some 40,000 names included such families as Dupont, Ford, Chrysler, Mellon, Morgan, and Vanderbilt, as well as the Agnelli family of Italy (owners of Fiat), Howard Hughes, R.J. Reynolds and Mrs. Vincent Astor.

Extensive articles about the purchases of these and other notables have appeared in publications from London to Australia, and throughout the United States. The New Yorker, Business Week, The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Newsweek, Cosmopolitan, and House & Garden are some of the national media that have documented the firm's unique ways of doing business. Newspapers coast to coast take note of what's new in the catalogues that come out as often as eight times a year, keyed to the seasons and the holidays.

Many of these articles and news reports illustrate the marketing strategies and philosophies that have enabled Hammacher Schlemmer to establish its leadership in a second field after casting aside its first leadership.

One key to this success is certainly the perspicacity to see the merchandise value in new ideas. William F. Schlemmer held court twice a week to talk with any inventor or promoter who had something to offer – even the most far-out. Succeeding management has continued the practice in one way or another. Most of the ideas have been turned down. The art is in picking those that are potential winners.

Buyers have scouted every gift show for years, and have also followed the trade shows of such industries as health care to discover what new developments might portend consumer products to come. New foreign products are screened in at least three or four trips abroad each year, resulting in the introduction of the best to the United States.

Customer service on a personal basis is the other cornerstone of success. If Hammacher Schlemmer doesn't have an item a customer wants, it is willing to search for it. Special installations or deliveries can always be arranged. The firm is not afraid of one-of-a-kind situations.

Unusual products and exceptional services are possible where competitive pricing is not a prime consideration. Mass merchandisers that must depend upon high volume could not undertake the pioneering that is typical of Hammacher Schlemmer. The rest of the industry watches closely what happens at Hammacher Schlemmer. What first succeeds there may well be found a few years later in chain and department stores everywhere.

Those who patronize Hammacher Schlemmer find pleasure in having what's new before everyone else does. Without having to look far they can always find the unusual and appropriate gift for that perplexing "man who has everything". A conversation piece on the coffee table helps to break the ice in a social gathering. Many items are good for a chuckle, but Hammacher Schlemmer has always avoided sex and practical jokes to get a laugh. You will find no nudies in your cocktail glass, and no snake will jump out at you from a cigarette box.

Tania Grossinger, author of The Book of Gadgets, says, "Basically, a gadget does something". Not necessarily something that could not be done just as well without it, although it may be energy or labor saving and economical. Gadgets that are truly functional have a good chance of becoming standard appliances. Those that are mainly for fun can justify their existence by providing just that. Hammacher Schlemmer pioneers with both types.

Some examples of gadgets primarily for fun are a pocket-sized pepper mill in a monogrammed leather case for the fussy gourmet restaurant diner and a transistorized parrot that flaps gaily painted wings, dilates red-lit eyes and repeats everything that is said to it.

Serious gadgets that have won a place in the American panoply of necessities and conveniences include the Mr. Coffee machine, the electric can opener, the cordless electric carving knife, and light switch controls that automatically turn lights on at night and off in daylight to thwart burglars.

Hammacher Schlemmer pays special attention to the needs of professional chefs and has introduced such devices as egg and potato peelers primarily for them.

Among developments on the labor-saving horizon today are the electric log-splitter and the cordless shrub trimmer. Hammacher Schlemmer was among the first stores to offer these devices. Who knows what will come next?

The End of an Era

Another immigrant boy, this one coming from Italy at the age of five with a widowed mother, was destined to hold the firm on its course in the transition that followed the death of William F. Schlemmer at age 69 in 1945.

Schlemmer owned about two thirds of the stock in the closely held corporation, the rest of the stock was spread among a few key employees and the Hammacher heirs abroad. The Schlemmers had no children, and Else F. O. Schlemmer took over the management of the company after her husband died.

Her strong right hand was Dominic Tampone, who had come to work as a stockboy in 1929 and soon rose to become its star salesman in the 1930's. He knew the business thoroughly and was in harmony with the late Schlemmer's merchandising philosophy.

Else Schlemmer continued to run the business until 1953, when she sold out to a syndicate. When she died three years later, her will contained bequests "to my children at the store", touching evidence of the spirit that had prevailed in the firm through its first century.

The new storeowners had the jitters over changes they perceived as occurring in the marketplace. The old-style rich were disappearing and the middle class was moving up in the post-World War II society, and they thought the company must adopt a new strategy to appeal to a broader market. As a result, they stocked more merchandise similar to what might be found in the larger department stores.

The policy was unsuccessful, and Hammacher Schlemmer entered one of its few downhill periods. Reputations are built slowly, and fortunately, they can hold through a decline if it is not too prolonged.

In 1955, a new syndicate acquired the company, headed by John Gerald, a well-known New York interior decorator. He initiated a return to top quality merchandise and

deluxe service, and brought back the gnomes and other traditions, except for the remnant of the hardware department, which was finally discontinued in 1955.

Tampone, who had stayed on through the vicissitudes, was named president of the company in 1959 and continued as its leader after the ownership passed in 1960 to Chester H. Roth, the chairman of Kayser-Roth Corporation. For the next 22 years, Tampone was able to run the company pretty much in his own way, even after Gulf & Western acquired it in 1975 as part of a takeover package that also included Kayser-Roth.

The Tampone Years

Dominic Tampone was an inventor of sorts, a gadgeteer, and a retailing genius. It was he who observed that toast made in an ordinary wire rack toaster that had to be watched often became charred and devised the idea for a pop-up toaster. He claimed to have dreamed up the basic ideas for more than 50 of the products featured in the store at one time or another. The rest he chose with a keen eye as to what would sell.

Among the gadgets were cuff links that tell the temperature in both Fahrenheit and centigrade, a three-dimensional ticktacktoe game, electric scissors, a pocket ashtray, and an auto key holder that pops the key into the driver's hand when the ignition is turned off.

The sense of showmanship that William F. Schlemmer possessed was amplified in Dominic Tampone. He set up the fifth floor at the store expressly for gadget items and labeled it Fanfare. For the businessman there was an electronic desk with a control panel like an airliner's and one of the first wastebasket shredders. A boon for women was the Gynodate alarm clock, which also registered their fertility cycle.

Tampone combed the markets of Europe for the latest luxuries and also brought in some traditional comforts not known in America, such as the English heated towel stand.

Invento was the name he created for a new buying and wholesale arm of the company. Besides being the supplier for Hammacher Schlemmer, which had first crack at the merchandise, Invento sold to other high quality stores, like Bloomingdale's in New York and Marshall Field in Chicago. Tampone reasoned that since others would copy the successes of Hammacher Schlemmer sooner or later anyway, the firm might as well garner a profit from it. In 1971, a retail outlet was opened in White Plains to sell Invento products. Both the wholesale and the retail operations have now been discontinued.

The perceptions of those who had bought the business from Mrs. Schlemmer and failed to make a go of it were right in one respect. There had been changes in the market. But Tampone maintained that the people were the same. It was their lifestyles that had changed. They have moved out of the brownstones into the smaller confines of apartments. Servants and formal dinner parties were out. Casual living, barbecue cooking, and do-it-yourself projects were in.

While the country was rocked by the explosive social and political changes of the 1960's and 1970's, Hammacher Schlemmer quietly adjusted its merchandising and the way it presented itself to fit contemporary lifestyles among the more affluent of the new generation. Gone were the frock coats of earlier days. The personal touch was still there, but the atmosphere was informal and friendly.

Tampone didn't like the term "gadgets", preferring to call them "fun things". Whatever the name, they intrigued him to the point of preoccupation. He also seemed to take great vicarious pleasure in seeing others walk home with the fascinating niceties that surrounded him daily at the store.

Carrying on the Tradition

Understandably, a relatively small and personal retailing operation like Hammacher Schlemmer hardly fits the strategic plan of a giant conglomerate like Gulf & Western. In 1980, G&W sold the company to an owner who could appreciate it and give it marketing attention as well as financial backing.

The buyer was J. Roderick MacArthur, a Chicago businessman and philanthropist who had acquired a reputation as an expert in creating successful marketing ideas for products that could be sold through the mails.

In the early 1980's he developed the idea of The Bradford Exchange, the world's largest trading center of collector's plates. He started by importing decorative collector's plates from France and expanded to the point where the exchange in 1983 sold \$100 million worth of plates which are made by the finest porcelain houses in Europe and the United States.

In 1981, Dominic Tampone was named vice chairman and a consultant to Hammacher Schlemmer. He died in August 1982 at the age of 72.

Catalogue production and mail order marketing operations were moved to Chicago in 1983. On June 1, 1984, the firm opened MacArthur's of Hammacher Schlemmer, at 618 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago. The new store is ideally located on the Magnificent Mile near Tiffany's, Neiman Marcus and not far from the very popular Water Tower Place. It is the firm's first retail venture outside the New York area, but there are many in the Chicago area who know it well.

Richard Tinberg, the current president, has a strong financial background and experience in mergers and acquisitions with the MacArthur organization. He has been assigned the task of guiding the company successfully through its new decade of growth. He seems as captivated as his predecessors with the gadgets, "fun things" and useful products that continue to attract shoppers to the New York store. When Tinberg's picture was last seen in the press, he was experimenting with the Gaggia Electric Distiller, a feature in the 1984 Spring Catalogue. The gnomes are back again and chances are they will charm the new owners off to Wonderland.